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## **‘Didi, are you Hindu?’ Politics of Secularism in Women's Activism in India: Case-study of a grassroots women's organization in rural Uttar Pradesh**

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‘Didi, are you Hindu?’ Politics of  
Secularism in Women’s Activism in India:  
Case-study of a grassroots women’s  
organization in rural Uttar Pradesh\*

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**Abstract**

In this paper I take the women’s movement as the site for unpacking some of the strains and tensions involved in practical interpretations of secularism in present-day India. Several sources within and outside the movement point out that there has been a tendency to take the existence of secularism for granted, and that the supposedly secular idioms and symbols used for mobilizing women have been drawn from Hindu religio-cultural sources. Women from Dalit and religious minority communities have felt alienated by this. Hindu nationalists have cleverly appropriated these idioms and symbols to mobilize women as foot soldiers to further religious nationalism. Through a case-study of a grassroots women’s NGO working in Uttar Pradesh, I seek to explore how women’s organizations may be reshaping their agendas and activism to address this issue. Specifically, I will examine how and why the 2002 Gujarat riots affected the NGO, the ways in which it has started working on the issue of communal harmony and engaging with Muslims since the riots, and the challenges with which it has been confronted as a result of its efforts. In doing so, I will show how the complexities of NGO-based women’s activism have become intertwined with the politics of secularism.

**Introduction**

Secularism is a multi-vocal word: ‘what it means depends upon who uses the word and in what context’.<sup>1</sup> The two meanings most commonly

\* Many thanks to Professor Geoffrey Hawthorn, Professor Patricia Jeffery, and Dr Francesca Orsini who read and commented on previous versions of this paper, and to Vimukt Mahila Samuh for their generous support of my fieldwork. As the author of the paper, I alone take responsibility for the analysis presented here.

<sup>1</sup> T. N. Madan (1993), ‘Whither Indian secularism?’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 27 (3), p. 674.

attributed to secularism in the Indian context are religious neutrality (*dharmanirpeksata*) and equal treatment of all religions (*sarva dharma sama bhava*).<sup>2</sup> The first of the two meanings equates secularism with 'universalism', that is, with treating people as citizens or as rights bearers, independent of their religious identity. The second equates it with 'pluralism' and maintaining communal harmony, that is, a state of affairs—real or imagined—in which 'communal' differences are acknowledged and accepted, and everyone is free to practise and profess their religion.

The first time that I felt truly compelled to ask myself about others' and my own practical interpretation of secularism was when I met a group of adolescent girls from caste-Hindu (Hindus of various caste groups), Dalit<sup>3</sup> (ex-Untouchable), and Muslim backgrounds who had been mobilized by a grassroots women's NGO in the small town of Banda in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. I found myself holding on to the 'universalism' interpretation of secularism, which the girls could not relate to. '*Didi* [older sister], are you Hindu?' they asked. When I replied that I did not subscribe to any particular faith, and that such things held little importance for me, one of them was quick to observe, 'Yes, there was another *did*i who had come to visit us from Lucknow and she said the same thing as you. But she was Muslim.'<sup>4</sup> They posed similar questions about my caste background. The girls had been on their way to perform at a monsoon (*sawan*) festival where people of different communities were to sing and dance together on the same platform. Clearly, for these small-town adolescent girls, their caste and religion were important markers of their identity and inescapable aspects of their everyday life. Interestingly, they were not at all fazed by my avowed disinterest in these categories. They had been able to gauge my religious background even though I had not answered their questions.

<sup>2</sup> For the two meanings of secularism outlined above, see Rustom Bharucha (1998), *In the Name of the Secular: Contemporary Cultural Activism in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> The literal translation of the word 'Dalit' from Hindi/ Marathi to English would be 'the oppressed'. It is used to denote ex-Untouchables or low-castes, also known as Scheduled Castes, in official parlance. 'Dalit' is a term that this grouping of people are said to have chosen for themselves.

<sup>4</sup> Participant observation of cultural programme organized by Vimukt Mahila Samuh to celebrate the onset of the monsoons, 8 August 2006, Chitrakoot district, Uttar Pradesh.

In this paper I take the women's movement as the site for unpacking some of the strains and tensions involved in real-world interpretations of secularism in present-day India. I define as the 'women's movement' all the mobilizing and organizing of women intended to make some sort of social change, which in direct and indirect ways contributes to a change in gender relations. The women's movement in India is a complex and variously located process. Existing in both urban and rural India today in a highly fragmented form, the movement consists of a multiplicity of actors. These include independent activists, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and autonomous women's groups, party-affiliated women's organizations, government-run initiatives, and research and documentation centres. It is perhaps the only movement in the country that engages with issues as varied as violence against women, social discrimination, economic self-dependence, environment protection, political representation, and globalization. Contentious debates rage over ideology, organizational structure, social base, issues, and modes of action among the various actors involved in the movement.<sup>5</sup>

Those involved in the women's movement have always claimed that 'secularism' is among their guiding principles. However, no concerted attempt has been made to clearly define the concept. Several sources within and outside the movement today point out that there has been a tendency to take the existence of secularism for granted. They argue that actors in the movement have ended up adopting, even if only inadvertently, women from dominant Hindu caste backgrounds as the subjects of their activism. They claim that the supposedly secular idioms and symbols used for mobilizing women have actually been drawn from Hindu religio-cultural sources. According to them, this

<sup>5</sup> This has led several scholars and activists to question whether it is possible to assume the existence of an overarching women's movement in India. See, for instance, Vina Mazumdar and Indu Agnihotri (1995), 'Changing terms of political discourse, women's movement in India 1970s–1990s', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30 (29), pp. 186–979, or Ilina Sen (ed.) (1990), *A Space Within the Struggle: Women's Participation in People's Movements*, New Delhi: Kali for Women. Some claim that there is no single women's movement but rather several women's movements in India. See, for instance, Manisha Desai (2002), 'Multiple mediations: the state and the women's movements in India', in D. S. Meyer, Belinda Robnett and Nancy Whittier (eds), *Social Movements: Identity, Culture and the State*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 66–84. While I do recognize that the women's movement in India is neither homogeneous nor monolithic in nature, I contend that the different strands of the movement are bound together by overlapping objectives and connections, and that, therefore, for the purpose of analysis, these strands may be examined under one rubric.

has happened because those at the forefront of the movement belong to dominant Hindu caste backgrounds. In their desire to mobilize the masses of women in India, and aware of the latter's attachment to religious norms and practices, the movement leaders seem to have drawn on the idioms and symbols from Hindu religio-cultural sources with which, given their backgrounds, they are most familiar. Women from Dalit and religious minority communities have felt alienated, if not excluded, by this.

It has become all the more urgent to address this issue because these idioms and symbols have been cleverly appropriated by Hindu nationalists. They have used these idioms and symbols to mobilize women as foot soldiers to further their agenda of religious nationalism. The communal riots of 2002 in Gujarat were, no doubt, the worst example of this. Scholars commenting on the women's movement in India (such as Flavia Agnes, Tanika Sarkar, and Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana) have written about this issue.<sup>6</sup> However, few seem to have empirically explored how—if at all—women's organizations may be reshaping their agenda and activism to address this issue.

In this paper, I attempt to do just that by presenting my findings from a case-study of a grassroots women's NGO working in Uttar Pradesh. There is a long and significant history of women's involvement in various peoples' movements (such as the land reforms movement, the farmers' movement, and the Chipko movement for environment protection) in the state. However, most women's activists working in present-day Uttar Pradesh date the beginnings of contemporary women's activism in the state to somewhere around the late 1980s and early 1990s. This is the period when Mahila Samakhya, the countrywide, state-sponsored women's education and empowerment programme, was initiated. It brought together state officials, the small number of women's activists and organizations previously active in urban centres like Lucknow and Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh, other activists and NGOs from outside the state, development NGOs and voluntary agencies which operated in the programme areas, and poor

<sup>6</sup> F. Agnes (1995), 'Redefining the agenda of the women's movement within a secular framework', in T. Sarkar and U. Butalia (eds), *Women and Right-Wing Movements: Indian Experiences*, London: Zed Books, pp. 136–157; T. Sarkar (1995), 'Woman, community, and nation', in Sarkar and Butalia (eds), *Women and Right-Wing Movements*, pp. 89–106; S. Tharu and T. Niranjana (1999), 'Problems for a contemporary theory of Gender', in N. Menon (ed.), *Gender and Politics in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 472–525.

and marginalized rural women. Its single most important achievement was its success in organizing large masses of rural women who had previously never been mobilized.

In present-day Uttar Pradesh, the influence of Mahila Samakhya is visible, in some form or another, in many of the recently formed NGOs. A quick survey of the prominent women's NGOs in the state reveals that most of them are headed by women who had previously been associated with Mahila Samakhya Uttar Pradesh.<sup>7</sup> Many who had first become involved in women's activism as fieldworkers, non-formal learners or as office assistants at the different branches of Mahila Samakhya in the state are now working for these NGOs. Vimukt Mahila Samuh (from here on Samuh), the NGO that I have chosen to examine, is also a product of Mahila Samakhya. Unlike most other NGOs in the state, Samuh is based in and operates out of rural areas, specifically Chitrakoot and Banda districts. Apart from Mahila Samakhya, it is the only women's organization operating in these districts.

Samuh was set up in 1993 with the intention of mobilizing 'poor and marginalized' rural women and imparting technical skills to contribute to their empowerment. Much of its work has been with Dalit women, mainly Chamar<sup>8</sup> women, training them as hand-pump mechanics to combat water scarcity, running micro-credit programmes to address their debt problems, and supporting cases of violence. Since 2002, it has begun working with Muslim women too. Samuh currently has 30 permanent employees who occupy different positions in the organizational hierarchy as leaders/directors, coordinators, paralegals, facilitators, fieldworkers, and caseworkers as well as accountants, office assistants, a driver, and a guard. Apart

<sup>7</sup> Field notes, July–August 2005, Chitrakoot.

<sup>8</sup> 'Chamar' is derived from the word '*chamarkar*', and literally means 'a leather worker'. The Chamars are the largest caste group among the Dalits and, under different names and sub-castes, are found throughout most of northern and central India. Historically associated with 'impure' activities such as leatherwork and the removal of dead animals, they often work as landless agricultural and manual labourers. Though among the lowest Untouchable castes, the Chamars are generally recognized as being one of the most advanced in terms of their educational achievements and the number of government jobs they manage to secure, by virtue of the reserved quota designed for them through a policy of positive discrimination. They are also among the most politically conscious of the Dalit castes. See Manuela Ciotti (2006), 'In the past we were a bit "Chamar": education as a self-and community engineering process in northern India', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (n.s.) 12, pp. 899–916.

from the two urban-educated, middle-class women who lead the organization, the rest of the employees are from the local population.

I treat Samuh less as a basis for characterizing the women's movement than as a 'test case', one that I consider most likely to surmount the criticisms that have been made against organizations that identify themselves with the movement. Its interest lies in its promise of success rather than in exhibiting well-rehearsed limitations and failures associated with the women's movement in contemporary India. My choice of Samuh is strategic: it works in rural areas whereas an urban bias is said to have contributed to the strains and tensions related to secularism in the context of the contemporary women's movement. Even though its founder-leader has a caste-Hindu background, its second leader is a Muslim and the staff members today consist of caste-Hindus, Dalits, and Muslims (providing a contrast to the criticism that the women's movement has a 'Hindu bias').

In the first section of the paper, I present a brief discussion on religion, secularism, and Hindu nationalism in relation to the women's movement in order to set the broad context for understanding Samuh's position on and engagement with secularism. In the second section, I examine how the 2002 Gujarat riots affected Samuh, leading the NGO to take cognizance of the 'crisis of secularism' and to start working on the issue of communal harmony and engaging with Muslims in southern Uttar Pradesh. I also try to analyse *why* it took riots in Gujarat for the NGO to start doing so, which is perhaps the trickier of the two questions on Samuh and the riots. To answer this question, I delve into an investigation of how the politics of secularism in the women's movement is deeply intertwined with the complexities of NGO-based activism. In the process of answering these questions, I explore whether the NGO's staff and leadership contributed to promoting communalism, even if only unintentionally.

In the third section, I proceed to explore exactly how the NGO is working on the issue of communal harmony with the group of adolescent girls from caste-Hindu, Dalit, and Muslim backgrounds in Banda as well as the others with whom the NGO has been engaged. In the fourth and final section of the paper, I examine the new challenges that have arisen as a result of the NGO's efforts to engage with Muslims and to promote communal harmony. Here, I focus on the NGO's use of the term 'minority' (*alpasankhyak*) to refer to Muslims, how far the NGO has been influenced by the official use of the term, and what this implies about its engagement with Muslims. I also examine in considerable detail the question of whether



sharing marginality can be—and really is—sufficient for the Dalits and Muslims mobilized by Samuh to experience a sense of solidarity.

The propositions and arguments made in this paper are based on my doctoral research on the women's movement in India. Apart from participant observation and documentation produced and/or collected by the NGO, the paper draws on interviews and focus group discussions that I conducted with the NGO staff and leadership, with women from Samuh-supported self-help groups, and with adolescent boys and girls mobilized by the NGO. To preserve anonymity, institutional names have been changed and all individuals quoted are either referred to by their broad designation within the organization or proxy names.

### **Religion, secularism, Hindu nationalist politics, and the women's movement**

Secularism, in the Indian context, has been expected to serve both as a political doctrine that guides state policy and as an ideal of multi-religious, multicultural cohabitation. There is no state religion in India and the state does not allow itself to be attached to and/or to favour any one religion. Yet it is not antagonistic to religious practices and beliefs. In fact, it has undertaken to ensure the protection of all religions:

It therefore makes a huge investment in matters of religion, unlike any nation in the West—for example, by administering religious trusts, declaring holidays for religious festivals, preserving the system of different personal laws for different communities, undertaking the reform of religious law, having secular courts interpret religious laws, and so on.<sup>9</sup>

The interpretation of the concept of secularism in India is in stark contrast to its standard English meaning, which implies the separation of the state and religious authority, broadly corresponding to the domains of public and private life.

In the Indian context, the project of secularism is deeply intertwined with the project of nationalism. Nationalism does not represent the transcendence of religious or cultural differences but their rerouting along the lines of majority and minority religions. Majority religions tend to be identified with the nation and therefore with secular culture, whereas minority religions are constituted as marginal to the nation.

<sup>9</sup> R. S. Rajan and A. D. Needham (2007), 'Introduction', in A. D. Needham and R. S. Rajan (eds), *The Crisis of Secularism in India*, Durham: Duke University Press, p. 20.

In the Indian context, state policies may be framed in a more or less neutral language but state practices have often entailed the strengthening of a Hindu idiom. A striking instance of this 'Hindu bias' is the state's focus on reforming Hindu religious customs and practices in the name of secularism, whereas minority communities are considered to be outside the state's realm of concern.

Secular Indian nationalism, as described above, must not be equated with Hindu nationalism. Hindu nationalists have a host of organizations, which together comprise the Sangh Parivar (family of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or National Volunteer Corps), including the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Bajrang Dal, and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. They accuse those who support official secularism of being 'pseudo-secular' and the Indian state of unduly favouring religious minorities in the name of secularism. The Bharatiya Janata Party, which in the 1990s managed to garner the support of a middle-class coalition of religious Hindus and those disaffected by excessive state intervention, has insisted that its own brand of secularism entails 'Justice for all, appeasement to none'.<sup>10</sup> Yet the primary agenda of the Hindu nationalists has been to set up a 'Hindu' nation. Central to their discourse has been the allegation that Muslims, in particular, constitute a threat to the 'Hindu community'. Indian Muslims, specifically Muslim men, have been portrayed as being complicit with Pakistan, militant, and sexually predatory.<sup>11</sup> This discourse is distinctly communal—that is, overtly discriminatory against a particular religious group, in this case, Muslims. On several occasions, it has led to Hindu–Muslim riots.

In comparison to Hindu nationalists' virulent communalism, secular Indian nationalism, with its 'Hindu bias', is a relatively banal form of communalism.<sup>12</sup> While secular Indian nationalism and Hindu nationalism cannot be conflated, worrisome continuities exist between the two. The virulent and banal communalisms that characterize their

<sup>10</sup> 1998 Bharatiya Janata Party election manifesto, cited in Rajan and Needham, 'Introduction', in Needham and Rajan (eds), *The Crisis*, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed discussion on the Hindu nationalists' anti-Muslim discourse, refer to Patricia Jeffery and Roger Jeffery (2006), *Confronting Saffron Demography: Religion, Fertility, and Women's Status in India*, Gurgaon: Three Essays Collective.

<sup>12</sup> For an elaboration on banal communalism, see P. K. Datta (1999), *Carving Blocks: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth Century Bengal*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, and Jeffery and Jeffery, *Confronting Saffron Demography*. The concept of banal communalism draws on that of banal nationalism. See Michael Billig (1995), *Banal Nationalism*, London: Sage Publications.

discourses feed one another. This is what constitutes the crux of the 'crisis of secularism', which is not limited to state and politics in India—indeed, it also affects social and cultural spheres of life, including civil society initiatives and multi-religious and multicultural coexistence.

My exchange with the group of adolescent girls from caste-Hindu, Dalit, and Muslim backgrounds mobilized by Samuh also needs to be understood in this context. The kind of reluctance that I had shown in publicly stating my caste and religious identity is typical of those whom Dilip Menon terms as the 'postcolonial elite'. These elite groups have been brought up on the Nehruvian vision of India and, in their desire to embrace a 'modern' subjectivity, they wish to consider themselves free from caste and religious markings in the public sphere.<sup>13</sup> Such elites, he claims, prefer to relegate practices associated with 'traditional' markings to the private sphere. For them, the elimination of public expressions of caste and religion is a requirement of secularism.

According to Nivedita Menon, these elites are mostly from dominant Hindu castes, especially upper castes.<sup>14</sup> They can afford to claim publicly that caste and community identities are of little consequence for them because their identities are considered the norm and this offers them protection against discrimination. In contrast, those from Dalit and religious minority communities are unlikely to make such a claim, as their caste and community identities make them vulnerable to discrimination. The Dalits tend to be reminded constantly of how they constitute the 'other' precisely because of their ex-Untouchable and often lower class identity. Those from religious minority communities, especially Muslims, are similarly reminded of the 'otherness' that arises from their religious identity. It is often the unconscious discrimination by the dominant Hindu castes that remind the Dalits and the Muslims of their caste and community identities. This is indeed a manifestation of banal communalism.

The caste and community identities that the dominant Hindu caste elites claim are of little consequence to them, especially in public, have, in reality, always mattered. People carry their community identities

<sup>13</sup> See Dilip Menon (2006), 'An inner violence: why communalism in India is about caste', in T. N. Srinivasan (ed.), *Threats to Secularism*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 60–82.

<sup>14</sup> For an elaboration of this argument, see Nivedita Menon (2007), 'Living with secularism', in Needham and Rajan (eds), *The Crisis*, pp. 118–40.

whether they want to or not, whether they have rejected them or not.<sup>15</sup>  
To quote Menon:

We were always legally Hindu and Muslim and Christian, governed by Hindu and Muslim and Christian personal laws. This is not an identity we can choose to take on or deny—this is an identity that we bear despite ourselves, it hangs from our names, our practices, the way we speak Indian languages.<sup>16</sup>

The girls' reaction to my reluctance to reveal my caste and religious background clearly reflects this.

In the remainder of this section, my focus shall be on understanding how, in the name of secularism, the repercussions of the overlaps between banal and virulent communalisms surfaced in the contemporary women's movement. Most women's organizations considered religion as a patriarchal construct to be ignored or, at best, resisted or challenged. By the 1980s, however, a number of these organizations seemed to realize that, to a large extent, women depend on religion as a spiritual mainstay and, by and large, are unwilling to reject religion per se. Myths, epics, and folktales were reinterpreted. Historical forms and symbols of women's power and resistance were unearthed. For some women's activists and organizations, this consisted of recasting images of women warriors and the all-powerful Hindu goddesses, Kali and Durga, into a feminist mould. It was hoped that women from different classes, castes, and cultural and regional backgrounds would be able to relate to and collectively identify with this repertoire of myths, epics, folktales, and symbols. The underlying motive behind this was to inculcate a feeling of 'sisterhood' among women and to inspire them to join the movement.<sup>17</sup>

However, Kali, Durga, and the other symbols that the women's organizations employed as metaphors for the power of Indian women were predominantly Hindu. This conscious or unconscious conflating

<sup>15</sup> For an insightful discussion on this issue, refer to Bina Srinivasan (2007), *Negotiating Complexities: A Collection of Feminist Essays*, New Delhi: Promilla and Co. Publishers in association with Bibliophile South Asia.

<sup>16</sup> Menon, 'Living with secularism', p. 136.

<sup>17</sup> For more on the women's movement actors' position on religion and use of religious symbols and idioms, see Gabriele Dietrich (1994), 'Women and religious identities in India after Ayodhya', in Kamla Bhasin, Ritu Menon and N. S. Khan (eds), *Against All Odds: Essays on Women, Religion and Development from India and Pakistan*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, pp. 35–59, and Radha Kumar (1993), *A History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800–1990*, New Delhi: Kali for Women.

of 'Hindu' with 'Indian' was problematic<sup>18</sup> and was indicative of the prevalence of banal communalism in the women's movement. Several scholars and activists from within and outside the movement have been critical of it. Agnes, for example, claims that since those at the helm of the movement were predominantly 'urban and upper class Hindu', the cultural expressions with which they were most familiar 'surreptitiously crept' into the movement. She contends that their intention was 'not to propagate Hindu ideology. But since the movement did not have "secularism" as one of its prime objectives, no conscious efforts were made to evolve alternate symbols...'<sup>19</sup> By this she implies that the mobilization and organization strategies employed by the movement did not take into account the separate religious identity of women, and that women who were not from Hindu communities could not relate to them. Overt Hindu symbols were clearly not 'secular'.

The dangers of banal communalism exemplified by the use of Hindu symbols, the way in which it was done, and the failure to engage seriously with secularism hit home with the resurgence of the Hindu nationalists. Accounts discussing Hindu nationalist politics in relation to the women's movement begin with the Shah Bano controversy. Here, the plea of a divorced Muslim woman for alimony from her husband was granted by the Supreme Court, based on 'secular' criminal laws. Shah Bano's husband challenged the judgement, arguing that no such payment was required under Muslim personal law.<sup>20</sup> The case exposed the discrepancies in the state's interpretation and practice of secularism. Afraid of losing Muslim votes, the Congress government overturned the Shah Bano judgement by passing the Muslim Women's Act in 1986 in the name of 'protecting' minorities. The Act exempted Muslim women from India's civil laws.

Following these developments, a uniform civil code became the issue of the moment in the Indian political scene, which further

<sup>18</sup> Geetanjali Gangoli explains very succinctly the conflating of 'Hindu' and 'Indian' and the complications that arise as a result. See Geetanjali Gangoli (2007), *Indian Feminisms: Law, Patriarchies and Violence in India*, Hampshire, England: Ashgate.

<sup>19</sup> Agnes, 'Redefining the agenda of the women's movement within a secular framework', p. 139.

<sup>20</sup> Four religious communities—the majority Hindu, and the minority Muslim, Christian, and Parsi communities—have their own personal laws. Other religious groups such as Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes are subsumed under Hindu law. See Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (2000), 'Women between community and state: some implications of the uniform civil code debates in India', *Social Text*, 65 (18), pp. 55–82.

exposed the contradictions between a secular constitution and a state that administers religious laws and is indulgent to religious communities' demands. More importantly, it brought out apparent and real convergences between sections of the women's movement and the Hindu nationalists. Women's groups had been pressing, since the 1960s, for the institutionalization of a nonsexist, uniform, 'secular' code, in the hope that it would ensure gender-just laws for women of all communities. They initially responded to the Shah Bano case and the Muslim Women's Act as being about women's rights. However, it was disconcerting to them that the Hindu nationalists were also using the Shah Bano case as a rallying cry for their demand for a uniform civil code. The Hindu nationalists' demand was overtly communal and covertly patriarchal. They envisaged the uniform civil code to be a version of Hindu law and hoped thereby to secure Hindu hegemony. They had no interest in formulating a gender-just uniform civil code as this would alienate their male support base, especially among the upper caste-Hindus. In spite of the stark contrast in their motivations, the women's groups were fearful about appearing to be on the same side as the Hindu nationalists.<sup>21</sup>

On 6 December 1992, Hindu nationalist activists demolished the Babri mosque in Faizabad (historically Ayodhya), Uttar Pradesh, unleashing a spate of Hindu-Muslim riots in Bombay and elsewhere in the country. At least 2,000 people were killed. The event marked one of the most defining moments in the history of contemporary India because it established the resurgence of the Hindu nationalists. Large numbers of Hindu women actively participated in this event, committing violence against Muslim men and women. The media first flashed images across the country of thousands of women symbolically

<sup>21</sup> These concerns did later result in the emergence of a number of different positions among the women's groups—ranging from a compulsory or egalitarian civil code for all citizens to reforms within communities with and/or without state intervention. Immediately after the Shah Bano controversy, however, these groups felt that by appropriating the women's movement's demand for a uniform civil code, the Hindu nationalists had taken over the very language and issues of the movement and had used them to promote a patriarchal, anti-minority agenda. For insightful observations on the issue of the uniform civil code and the women's movement, see Amrita Chhachhi (1994), 'Identity politics, secularism and women: a South Asian perspective', in Zoya Hasan (ed.), *Forging Identities: Gender, Communities and the State*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, pp. 74–95; Nivedita Menon (1998), 'State/gender/community: citizenship in contemporary India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33 (5), p. PE310; and Rajan, 'Women between community and state', pp. 55–82.

carrying construction material for the Ram temple that was to be built on the site of the Babri mosque. During the Bombay riots that followed, hundreds of Hindu women made petrol bombs that their menfolk then hurled into Muslim shanties.<sup>22</sup>

That women of one community participated in violence against men and women of another community questioned the very premise on which the women's movement had constructed its demands and identity. The movement in India had assumed that women would remain united by their common gender identity, irrespective of differences in their caste, class, religious, and regional backgrounds. Scholars such as Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana claim that in the 1980s women's activists and organizations had vigorously devoted themselves to drawing out 'women' from the abstract or politically 'neutral' and universalizing category of 'citizens', and to placing 'women' on the state and development analysts' agenda.<sup>23</sup> What these activists and organizations had failed to recognize was that the category 'women' was in itself an abstraction, that women have many identities and that, under different circumstances, they may favour one or the other of their identities, at times, even over their gender identity.

The Hindu nationalists had more success in mobilizing women than the women's movement. The women's movement appeared to consider the family a key element of patriarchal organization. It demanded that women challenge family structures and patriarchal norms but failed to provide them with an alternative. The Hindu nationalists, in contrast, did not demand that women distance themselves from their family and community contexts, to which they related and to which they felt they belonged. In fact, the nationalists recognized the fact that women's ties with religion were deeply intertwined with notions of family and community, and used this to their advantage. They cleverly mapped the identity and honour of the 'Hindu' community on women. Activism aimed at protecting such honour was not only sanctioned but also lauded by the community, and resulted in women emerging from the confines of domesticity as invaluable footsoldiers in the Hindu nationalist project. The *shakti* (strength) of the modern Durga, a

<sup>22</sup> These observations draw on Srilatha Batliwala and Deepa Dhanraj (2007), 'Gender myths that instrumentalize women: a view from the Indian frontline', in Andrea Cornwall, Elizabeth Harrison and Ann Whitehead (eds), *Feminisms in Development: Contradictions, Contestations and Challenges*, London: Zed Books, pp. 21–34.

<sup>23</sup> See Tharu and Niranjana, 'Problems for a contemporary theory of gender', pp. 472–525.

symbol that the Hindu nationalists had allegedly appropriated from the women's movement, was not directed against violence against other women. It was instead mobilized to commit violence against Muslims—the 'outsiders'.<sup>24</sup>

The 2002 Gujarat Hindu–Muslim riots are said to have marked the apex of Hindu nationalist politics in the country.<sup>25</sup> What was made clear—even as women continued to bear the brunt of the violence—was that women's active participation in communal violence was not a one-off phenomenon limited to the Bombay riots of 1992. Women from dominant Hindu castes are said to have actively aided and abetted in the violence. The 2002 riots also offered a striking example of how, by exploiting the accepted anti-Muslim stereotypes and building on them, the Hindu nationalists were successful in mobilizing the Dalits. In addition, no government has ever been as blatantly involved in causing and aggravating a riot as it is said to have been in Gujarat.

Unlike almost all previous riots, the acts of destruction revealed themselves to be deliberate ideological strategies. Mosques were not simply demolished but saffron flags and statues of Hanuman (the monkey deity worshipped by the Hindus) were planted in the rubble, symbolizing the spatial claims of forces out to establish a Hindu nation. The numerous NGOs in Ahmedabad are said to have been generally unresponsive at the time the violence took place: 'In the most infamous example of this, Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram refused to grant shelter to Muslims fleeing the wrath of angry mobs.'<sup>26</sup> The handful of NGOs that did show interest in the plight of the Muslims were threatened with dire consequences by the Hindu nationalist forces. In the immediate aftermath, it was predominantly Muslim organizations that provided relief for the (mostly Muslim) victims. The post-conflict relief efforts ironically furthered the religious divide rather than mitigating it. It was only later that a large number of

<sup>24</sup> Comparisons and contrasts of the Hindu nationalists' and the women's movement's mobilization of women are available in several of the essays in Sarkar and Butalia (eds), *Women and Right-Wing Movements*.

<sup>25</sup> The discussion that follows on how the 2002 Gujarat Hindu–Muslim riots were markedly different from previous such riots draws mainly on Nivedita Menon (2004), *Recovering Subversion: Feminist Politics Beyond the Law*, Delhi: Permanent Black; Amrita Basu and Srimati Roy (2004), 'Prose after Gujarat: violence, secularism and democracy in India', in Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *Will Secular India Survive?*, Gurgaon: ImprintOne, pp. 320–55.

<sup>26</sup> Basu and Roy, 'Prose after Gujarat', p. 325.



NGOs from all over the country started converging upon Gujarat to provide relief and to engage in reconstruction work.

### **Gujarat riots, the communal question, and the NGO**

In the course of my interactions with them, both Samuh's leadership and staff repeatedly claimed that the Gujarat riots marked a turning point for the organization. While one of the Samuh leaders, a trained lawyer and, at the time, the NGO's only Muslim member, began to take a keen interest in the riot-related court cases, other members of the organization travelled to Ahmedabad and actively involved themselves in post-riot relief and reconstruction work.<sup>27</sup> For the majority of Samuh's staff and leadership, this was their first opportunity to work with Muslims and it proved to be, in many ways, an eye-opener for them. Their interactions in the camps allowed them to learn about Muslim cultural norms and practices and dispelled many of their prejudices. They had believed Muslims to be disloyal to India, that they tended to ignore calls for family planning, that they collected arms, and were extremely conservative and orthodox.<sup>28</sup> The staff and leadership even admitted that they had taken for granted that their activism was shaped by a secular framework, and they had assumed that communalism did not affect their lives in any way. In the words of one of the Samuh paralegals, who is from an upper-caste background:

It may have happened but this is about Ayodhya. It may have happened but this is about Ahmedabad. This is not a concern for us. Where we live, such things never happen. This is how we used to think before...<sup>29</sup>

Chitrakoot district, Samuh's main area of operation, had always been considered the hotbed of communalism in the region. Chitrakoot town is a place of pilgrimage for devout Hindus.<sup>30</sup> Powerful landlords from dominant Hindu castes controlled the land and the people working it. Leaders of Hindu nationalist outfits like the Rashtriya

<sup>27</sup> This information is drawn from an interview with a paralegal at Samuh, 22 November 2005, Chitrakoot, and a focus group discussion with a mixed group of Samuh staff members, 24 November 2005, Chitrakoot.

<sup>28</sup> Here I draw on three focus group discussions that I conducted with a mixed group of Samuh staff members, 25 August 2005, Chitrakoot.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with a paralegal at Samuh, 22 November 2005, Chitrakoot.

<sup>30</sup> Chitrakoot is known for having been the place where characters from Hindu mythology, namely Lord Rama and Sita, sought refuge after they were exiled from Ayodhya many centuries ago.

Swayamsevak Sangh were active in the district. Mahila Samakhya, the women's education and empowerment programme, of which Samuh is a product, was an Indian government initiative that worked closely with one of the oldest social service organizations in the region. Although not explicitly communal, this organization was—and is still—said to have links with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Bharatiya Janata Party.<sup>31</sup>

Speaking about her awareness of the presence of such communal actors in the region, the Samuh founder-leader, who had previously worked for Mahila Samakhya, and whom I quoted above, boldly observed:

Did we not realise? We did and we didn't. The day I found out about [the social service organisation] feeding hundreds of people offering their services for free for the Hindu nationalist cause [*karsevaks*] going to Ayodhya [for the demolition of the Babri Masjid], I quit. This was 1992. Yet, somewhere, I chose to overlook it. The same people I [began] working with supported the demolition. I hadn't realised that they felt like that because we'd never even opened up that topic. So it was a part of us that we had just been ignoring.<sup>32</sup>

On another occasion, linking the shortcomings of her own NGO and Mahila Samakhya to the women's movement's failure to adopt a secular framework and to engage with Muslim women, she observed:

If you look at [Mahila Samakhya's set of] training modules, it was very focussed on gender. Somewhere the nuances of minority/majority were not recognised. Yes, I know that Agnes had already written by that time about how women of minority communities were being excluded by the women's movement but we were still not recognising these things.<sup>33</sup>

She and the paralegal quoted above were not the only ones to have spoken about this reluctance to recognize such things in those days. Razia, also a leader at Samuh, said that, as a Muslim, she too had felt constantly discriminated against when she was living in Chitrakoot. She had trouble renting a house and she was looked at with suspicion. Even at Samuh, she felt something amiss about the fact that she was the only Muslim member and that her organization engaged mainly with women from a predominantly Hindu religio-cultural background.

<sup>31</sup> This information is drawn from two interviews, the first with a male leader of a local voluntary organization supported by the Hindu nationalists, 13 August 2005, Chitrakoot; and the second with a male leader of a local land rights organization, 23 August 2006, Chitrakoot.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Samuh's founder-leader, 18–21 September 2006, Lucknow.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Samuh's founder-leader, 18–21 September 2006, Lucknow.

However, she did not question this as she considered herself and her organization to be guided by 'secular' principles.<sup>34</sup>

It was only after the Gujarat riots that things changed. Samuh acknowledged that discrepancies had arisen between the objectives it had set out to achieve and what it had actually achieved. To quote the founder-leader:

What happened in Gujarat really shook us up. It made us think about how unprepared we were if something like this were to happen in U[tar] P[radesh]... We [had been] saying that Samuh works with people on the margins... From the beginning, we had said Samuh is a secular organisation. And then we realised that... we weren't fulfilling our objectives of including all those at the 'margins', including the Muslims. We had mouthed something that we hadn't done in practice!<sup>35</sup>

From the above discussion, it is evident that Gujarat 2002 marked a turning point for the organization, particularly for the NGO staff and leaders' participating in the post-riot relief and reconstruction work. The interviews also shed light on the ability of Samuh's team of workers to examine themselves and their work honestly and to make efforts to overcome their failure to be truly secular. This is especially significant since, unlike the Gujarat-based NGOs which had similarly failed and were therefore compelled to examine themselves and to change, the NGOs like Samuh, working with women elsewhere in the country and therefore not directly affected by the riots, faced no such compulsions and, in fact, many of them had chosen to remain aloof from these developments.

Much as I appreciate the organization's explanation about how its involvement in post-riot relief and reconstruction work in Gujarat changed its perspective, and its willingness to put the new perspective into practice, I consider that there remain gaps in this explanation, which may not be obvious to the NGO staff and leadership. I argue that, in addition to their 'Hindu majoritarianism' or failure to be truly secular, the reasons for their engagement with the issue of communalism and for mobilizing Muslim women only after the 2002 riots are linked with the politics of funding.

Like most NGOs, Samuh had taken up externally funded projects to become financially stable. These projects were geared primarily towards the provision of services ranging from livelihood support to

<sup>34</sup> These observations are drawn from my interview with Samuh's Muslim leader, 11 June 2005, London.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Samuh's founder-leader, 18–21 September 2006, Lucknow.

legal aid within the existing social structures, and were designed for 'poor and marginalized' women. Typically, for most national and international funding agencies, the 'target' marginalized groups were usually Dalits, tribals, and women. Muslims, who were as marginalized as the Dalits and the tribals, and who, unlike them, did not benefit from government reservations and special development schemes did not register as a marginalized community in the funding agencies' scheme of things.<sup>36</sup> For nearly nine years of its existence, Samuh too, funded by such agencies, had mobilized, in the name of the 'poor and marginalized', poor Dalit women but not poor Muslim women. In need of funding to stay afloat, it had done so more or less unquestioningly.

Things changed in 2002. With the media's daily coverage of the riots and the riot-affected victims, the communal question and the condition of Muslims became an issue for national and international debate. A number of funding agencies—both national and international—now began to show an interest in financing projects that involved Muslims. NGOs genuinely interested in working with Muslims found this an opportune shift. However, there were many others who only showed an interest in working with Muslims because doing so would attract funding. It is important to note, however, that funding was mostly made available for promoting communal harmony.

The first-hand experiences of Samuh's staff and leadership during relief and reconstruction work in Gujarat had made them sensitive to the need to work with Muslims in southern Uttar Pradesh. By this time, Samuh had also established itself as an important actor in the NGO sector in India. It was financially stable and in a position to negotiate its own terms for accepting and even proposing projects. It was able to secure funding from a well-known Indian trust and a Japanese peace foundation to work with Muslims.<sup>37</sup>

However, some local and regional NGO leaders whom I interviewed claimed that Samuh's underlying motive for working on issues of communal harmony and for involving Muslims in its activism was so that its leaders would gain national and international publicity for

<sup>36</sup> This argument is drawn from the Centre for Human Rights and Development (2008), 'Advocating Rights of Muslims: Problems and Challenges', A Preliminary Report for the CHRD, <[http://www.socialjusticeindia.org/minority\\_rights.htm](http://www.socialjusticeindia.org/minority_rights.htm)>, [accessed 12 August 2012].

<sup>37</sup> My observations on Samuh's sources of—and situation with respect to—funding are based on a focus group discussion that I conducted with a mixed group of Samuh staff members, and from Vimukt Mahila Samuh (2005), *Annual Report 2004–2005*, Chitrakoot: Vimukt Mahila Samuh.

themselves and thereby acquire more funding and projects for the organization. All of a sudden, national and international aid agencies wanted to fund projects to promote communal harmony and mobilize Muslims, and Samuh, having established itself as a 'dependable' NGO and known for its good work with women in Uttar Pradesh, came to be the beneficiary of such funding.<sup>38</sup>

I do consider that the politics of funding and Samuh's position in the NGO sector played an important part in facilitating its efforts to reinvent itself by involving Muslims in its activism and by promoting communal harmony. Further, Samuh's work in Gujarat, especially its leaders' involvement in seeking justice for the riot-affected women who had filed cases in court, did indeed draw the attention of the media as well as that of national and international aid agencies to the NGO. However, I do not find anything seriously wrong with any of this as long as the NGO does keep up its commitment to work with Muslims and on the issues of communal harmony.

### **NGO activism, secularism, and local culture**

One of the first steps taken by Samuh's staff and leadership upon their return was to raise awareness about what had happened in Gujarat. They hoped this would create a context for broaching the issue of communalism with the local population. One of the modes it used for raising awareness was a scroll with images (*phad*), depicting the story of two girls, one Hindu, the other Muslim. The Muslim girl suffered repeatedly in the spate of riots that broke out in Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat, and ended up losing her belongings and family, even experiencing physical abuse at the hands of Hindu rioters. Yet, in the name of humanity, the Hindu girl assured the Muslim girl of her unconditional friendship and took her in.<sup>39</sup> The NGO staff members had prepared the scroll, and gone from village to village displaying it and sharing their experiences of post-riot relief work in Gujarat.

<sup>38</sup> These observations are based on three interviews, the first with a female leader of a women's NGO, 24 August 2006, Chitrakoot; the second with a male leader of a local voluntary organization mainly running self-help groups, 13 August 2005, Chitrakoot; and the third with a male leader of another local voluntary organization, 24 August 2006, Chitrakoot.

<sup>39</sup> I have reconstructed the story based on Vimukt Mahila Samuh (2002), *Annual Newsletter*, Chitrakoot; Vimukt Mahila Samuh, and an interview with a paralegal at Samuh, 22 November 2005, Chitrakoot.

The scroll offers important insights into Samuh's strategy for raising awareness about communalism. That the two girls in the story were originally from Uttar Pradesh and found themselves embroiled in the politics of communalism that was wreaking havoc in distant Gujarat is no insignificant detail. It reflects a conscious effort on the part of Samuh to choose contexts and characters that the people living in Chitrakoot and Banda could easily relate to. Further, it gives due importance to the power of live, visual performances. This is particularly relevant since the NGO works with mostly illiterate and semi-literate women. Speaking about the effect of such performances on people in the region, one of the Samuh paralegals observes:

News is one thing. But when you see people suffering in front of your own eyes, it is soul-wrenching [*atma ko jhinjhor ke rakh deta hai*]. People would come up to us and say, 'Yes, we had heard of the riots on the radio. It used to come on TV. But we never realised how bad it was [until we saw your performance].'<sup>40</sup>

From Samuh's work in Gujarat emerged the understanding that interaction among people of different communities can play a key role in dissipating misconceptions about one another. However, there was a paucity of common forums for such interaction in the rural areas of southern Uttar Pradesh. Caste-, class-, religion-, and gender-based divisions in society kept people apart. With the exception of Razia Khan, Muslims were absent even in Samuh's own initiatives and staff.<sup>41</sup> The leadership realized that it would have to put its own house in order before reaching out to those outside.

When Samuh initially began making efforts to involve Muslim women and to create a more inclusive work environment, its efforts were met with resistance from several of its own staff members.<sup>42</sup> Deep-seated communal biases harboured for years cannot be expected to disappear overnight. However, accepting the discomfort of one's deepest assumptions can be a crucial step towards changing one's mindset. This is something that the members of the organization seemed to have begun doing. To facilitate this process, in-house workshops were organized by the NGO with the assistance of Delhi-based NGOs.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with a paralegal at Samuh, 22 November 2005, Chitrakoot.

<sup>41</sup> The lists of Samuh employees given at the end of the annual newsletters and reports illustrate this. See, for instance, Vimukt Mahila Samuh (2002), *Annual Newsletter*, Chitrakoot: Vimukt Mahila Samuh.

<sup>42</sup> Samuh staff members openly discussed this in a focus group discussion, 24 November 2005, Chitrakoot.

A new branch of Samuh had been set up in Banda district in 2001 to handle the large number of cases of violence against women there. When the NGO decided to start its work on the communal question, the focus of the Banda branch shifted to mobilizing Muslims. Samuh's office was strategically located in a Muslim neighbourhood in Banda town. The NGO staff and leadership claim that the Banda branch was to be an experiment in working with Muslims. Today, Muslim women have been mobilized in Chitrakoot too. Eight of Samuh's 30 full-time employees are Muslims.

Samuh has launched several initiatives in both Chitrakoot and Banda, involving caste-Hindus, Dalits, and Muslims. The most prominent among these are the Conversations Forum and Tremor Forum. The Conversations Forum has been set up in Banda town with the intention of bringing together adolescent girls from caste-Hindu, Muslim, and Dalit backgrounds. The Tremor Forum, set up in Chitrakoot district, conducts cricket and other sports tournaments for adolescent Hindu, Muslim, and Dalit boys and girls. Samuh's staff and leadership do not explicitly employ the term 'secularism' in their activism, and insist they are 'just creating non-confrontational, creative spaces for various communities to be together'.<sup>43</sup> However, I consider that examining such contexts/spaces as the Conversations Forum and Tremor Forum offers interesting insights into the organization's rhetoric as well as practice of secularism. The very fact that the NGO includes all the communities that it usually works with in these initiatives suggests that it broadly defines secularism as 'pluralism', as a struggle against not only religious conflict but also against class-, caste-, and gender-based discrimination.

In January and November 2005, and subsequently in November 2006, district-level cricket tournaments were organized under the auspices of the Tremor Forum. Keen that a sense of ownership should emerge, Samuh encouraged members of the different villages which had teams participating to take on leadership roles in organizing the tournaments. Samuh placed only one condition on team formation: that it should consist of 50 per cent Hindus and 50 per cent Muslims, and if there were not sufficient numbers of Muslims, then

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Samuh's founder-leader, 18–21 September 2006, Lucknow; and focus group discussions with Samuh staff members, 24 and 25 November 2005, Chitrakoot.

33 per cent were to be from Dalit, Muslim, and 'general [*samanya*]'<sup>44</sup> backgrounds.<sup>45</sup>

What is of particular interest here is that in order to promote a sense of camaraderie and solidarity, the NGO employed the discourse of reservations; a discourse with a vocabulary and grammar already familiar to the local population as a result of the growing politicization of caste in local and national politics. In fact, a further look at the other details of the conception, organization, and execution of the tournaments reveals that, through them, Samuh was trying to put together a cluster of symbols, idioms, and slogans that, it hoped, would promote a respect for difference among the villagers. This reflects that Samuh is conscious of the fact that '[secularism] needs to be communicated in idioms comprehensible to people at large', and is employing innovative means to do so.<sup>46</sup>

Another example of the NGO's efforts in this direction is the oath that the players were required to take at the inauguration ceremony of each tournament, which I have reconstructed here:

We, the people of Chitrakoot district, pledge that as citizens we believe in ensuring that every fellow citizen living in our region has the right to economic, social and political justice; the freedom to believe and express his/her views; the freedom of religion and of pursuing any religion-related work; the right to live life with equal respect and dignity; and that wherever we live, we will struggle to establish these values.<sup>47</sup>

The oath and the language used were actually employed for a set of expressive and instrumental purposes. The very act of the players, who belonged to different caste and religious communities, collectively taking the oath was intended to promote informal fellowship and to cement their identity as a team. Further, Samuh seemed to be trying to convey, through the wording of the oath, the importance of recognizing difference, living tolerantly, and being aware of one's rights and fighting to ensure them. By insisting that the oath be taken at every tournament, the NGO was linking the social and political messages it wanted to convey with elements from the cultural milieu of the rural adolescent and adult populations attending the tournaments.

<sup>44</sup> By 'general' category, the NGO meant all categories of Hindu caste groups.

<sup>45</sup> The condition for team formation was clearly stated in Vimukt Mahila Samuh (2005), *Tremor Forum tournament*, flyer, Chitrakoot: Vimukt Mahila Samuh.

<sup>46</sup> Bharucha, *In the Name of the Secular*, p. 100.

<sup>47</sup> I have reconstructed the oath based on my observation of the Tremor Forum cricket tournament supported by Samuh, 23 November 2005, Chitrakoot.



The people of Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh traditionally place a lot of importance on oaths.

The oath also illustrates the NGO's understanding and expectations of the contemporary Indian state and its engagement with secularism. A close reading of the oath brings to mind the language of secularism in the Indian Constitution, specifically Articles 14, 15, and 29, which guarantee equality of citizenship; and Articles 19 and 25, which guarantee freedom of speech and expression, and freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess, practise, and propagate religion. While it is not part of the brief of this paper to delve too deeply into these Articles, they are mentioned here to support the argument that by having the wording of the oath resonate with the language of secularism in the constitution, Samuh was trying to make the state's discourse on secularism accessible and meaningful for the adolescent and mostly illiterate or semi-literate adult population of rural Chitrakoot.

Further, by means of the carefully formulated oath, the NGO also seemed to be trying to legitimize its own discourse and practice of secularism, assuming the state to be an impartial authority that operates in the interests of all. The organization appeared to make a distinction between the normative state and the empirical state. *In principle*, the state protects and promotes the rights of all communities since it enshrined such rights in the constitution, but *in practice* it has failed to do so. The agents of the state, including the police and the administrative machinery, have fallen short of fulfilling their duty. In fact, this distinction between the normative state and the empirical state consistently reappears in the organization's discourse, and is ultimately crucial to its secularist agenda.<sup>48</sup> Samuh does not, at any point, question the normative state and secularism as a value (of non-discrimination, acceptance of difference, mutual respect). It only points out its failure in practice and, therefore, attempts to find ways of reinventing it and expanding its meaning in its empirical form.

It is, then, evident that inviting important local state officials to inaugurate the tournaments was a strategic move on Samuh's part. By so doing, it intended to send out various messages.<sup>49</sup> First, the

<sup>48</sup> For an example of this discourse, see Vimukt Mahila Samuh (2002), *Annual Newsletter*, Chitrakoot: Vimukt Mahila Samuh.

<sup>49</sup> I learned about several of the messages that the NGO intended to convey from my interview with a paralegal at Samuh, 24 August 2006, Chitrakoot.

NGO expected that this would publicly demonstrate its engagement with the local state. Second, it would increase media coverage of the event. Third, it would raise the prestige of the event in the eyes of the local rural population. In fact, in November 2005, several local newspapers such as *Dainik Jagaran* did report 'the inauguration of Samuh's Tremor Forum cricket tournament by the Superintendent of Police'.<sup>50</sup> Fourth, it would symbolically put the stamp of state approval on the organization's attempts to bring together different communities and demarginalize Dalits and Muslims in public space. Last, but not the least, the NGO hoped to publicly remind state officials (like the superintendent of police) of their commitment to secular principles.

The discussion on Samuh's attempts at promoting communal harmony would be incomplete without a reference to its focus on mobilizing young people in its endeavours. When asked about the NGO's choice of working with young people, the founder-leader observed, 'We wanted to do something different. The youth has positive energy. They don't have any baggage. There is the potential, the possibility of an open space. . . They are easy to mould, very ready to participate, very vocal.'<sup>51</sup> The shift in strategy from primarily 'women-only' initiatives to working with young people is, then, a conscious move on the part of the NGO. Samuh hopes to use young people as a means of reaching out to the adult population. It believes that if young people are exposed to secular beliefs and practices, they have the capacity to change existing social relations, by setting a positive example. The Tremor Forum cricket tournaments organized in 2005 had a big turnout, but only among the adolescent male participants. In order to encourage adolescent girls to take part in the tournaments, Samuh organized a monsoon festival under the auspices of the Tremor Forum. Day-long cultural programmes were held in two villages. The Conversations Forum girls were invited to travel from Banda to Chitrakoot district to perform at the festival. Samuh hoped that this would encourage the men and women watching the programmes to let their daughters to step out of their homes more freely and to participate in the activities organized by the NGO.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> *Dainik Jagaran*, 24 November 2005.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Samuh's founder-leader, 18–21 September 2006, Lucknow.

<sup>52</sup> This was also something that was mentioned during my interview with a paralegal at Samuh, 24 August 2006, Chitrakoot.

The Conversations Forum girls comprised a group of caste-Hindus, Dalits, and Muslims. They were travelling out of Banda without parental supervision, and were performing before a large gathering of people mostly unknown to them. They sang songs of peace and friendship. In fact, while some of the girls sang, others held up a banner decorated with the universal faith symbol. The NGO seemed to be trying, yet again, to make notions associated with secularism, otherwise alien to the illiterate and semi-literate local populace, accessible and meaningful. It seemed to expect that by getting local actors to perform these ideals and at a monsoon festival, it was imbuing them with locally specific nuances that the populace would be able to relate to.<sup>53</sup>

It is important to note that not only has the NGO never made this project—of making secularism meaningful in the everyday lives of the local populace in Chitrakoot and Banda districts—an overt one, but that the young people mobilized as part of Conversations Forum and Tremor Forum have also never really perceived it as such. For the majority of the adolescent girls, the Conversations Forum is mostly an opportunity to get out of their home environment. It is a legitimate space where they can explore their talents and acquire new technical and interpersonal skills. The Forum is run mainly as a summer camp where lessons in photography; using computers; sewing, stitching, and knitting; and henna (*mehndi*) are offered along with social learning activities such as group discussions and public speaking. Run by a *women's* NGO, the Forum provides a space that parents believe is a socially acceptable place for their adolescent daughters to attend.<sup>54</sup>

The case of the Tremor Forum boys is no different. They claim to be members of the Forum only because of their love of cricket. According to them, the tournament, organized under the auspices of the Forum, is 'the biggest tournament of its kind in the district', and never before has cricket been sponsored and played at the level of the entire district.<sup>55</sup> While they do not perceive the Forum as an initiative towards promoting communal harmony, the relations between the adolescent boys from different communities are beginning to evolve,

<sup>53</sup> I draw on my participant observation of cultural programmes organized by Samuh, 8 and 9 August 2006, Chitrakoot.

<sup>54</sup> The statements made here are based on (open-ended) group discussions that I had with the adolescent girls and young women from the Conversations Forum on 26 and 27 July 2006, Banda.

<sup>55</sup> (Open-ended) group discussion with adolescent boys associated with the Tremor Forum, 21 August 2006, Chitrakoot.

even if in subtle and indirect ways. They may not play cricket together in the gullies of the village all year round, but come Tremor Forum tournament season each year and they are back to practising for the matches as a team. This has also had a ripple effect on the adults in the village, since the boys have often had to convince their families to allow them to play with boys from different caste and religious communities.

On the whole, both the Conversations Forum and Tremor Forum have also afforded the NGO staff with credible pretexts to engage with the families of the young people, and to be aware of what is happening in the different communities. Further, these initiatives have made it possible for the NGO to gain the trust of the members of different communities, to be in a position to influence them constructively, and to try to diffuse communal tensions if and when they arise. While social relations among the members of different communities may still be far from harmonious, what is clear is that the Conversations Forum and Tremor Forum initiatives have provided the opportunity for Samuh to go beyond the purely reactive approach of *combating communalism* (initially embodied by the *phad* and workshops) to a more positive and long-term agenda of *promoting secularism*.

Such shifts in the NGO's engagement may offer important cues for scholars commenting on secularism as well as for those activists within and outside the Indian women's movement who are interested in making secularism meaningful in practice. However, they also pose critical challenges and new dilemmas for the NGO's own staff and leadership, and for those whom it mobilizes. Some of these challenges and dilemmas will be discussed in the next and final section of the paper.

### **Identity, human rights, and Muslim-Dalit solidarity**

Over the years, identity has emerged as a crucial component of Samuh's activism in southern Uttar Pradesh. Identity may be loosely defined as 'the process by which social actors recognize themselves—and are recognized by other actors—as part of broader groupings'.<sup>56</sup> In trying to unpack the challenges and dilemmas that arise as a result of the NGO's attempts to mobilize Muslims and promote

<sup>56</sup> D. D. Porta and M. Diani (1999). *Social Movements: An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, p. 85.

communal harmony, in this section I will examine how Muslims' identity is understood and imagined by the NGO, perceived by the Dalits, and experienced by Muslims themselves. I also explore Muslim-Dalit relations and issues pertaining to collective identity that arise in this regard.

While a small percentage of Christians also inhabit the two districts, Muslims are the only minority community with which the NGO works. Yet, to begin with, there was no mention of 'Muslims' anywhere in the NGO documentation. In 2005, when I first visited Chitrakoot and Banda, the NGO staff and leadership spoke of their work with the 'minority' or *alpasankhyak*, not Muslims. One would think that the choice of the term 'minority' is relevant in that it is also part of the 'secular' discursive repertoire of the Indian state. I was tempted to consider that this reflected Samuh's readiness to engage with secularism as enshrined in the Constitution. It could also be interpreted as Samuh's attempt to make otherwise opaque constitutional categories and state discourse accessible to illiterate and semi-literate rural populations, and embed these in the public discourse and the local dialect. However, I observed that the Muslims with whom the NGO engaged rarely referred to themselves as '*alpasankhyak*'.<sup>57</sup> This led me to ask the NGO workers why they used this term.

Here are two Samuh members' observations, which are representative of the responses I received. The first is from a paralegal who was closely associated with the organization's initiatives for promoting communal harmony, the other is from the founder-leader:

Several workshops were conducted, at Samuh, on the issue of communalism. We were told that Muslims are less in number [compared to the Hindus]. So the term used for them was 'minority'. Also, we know that they have been given space in the Indian Constitution as 'minority'...<sup>58</sup>

[Minority] is an administrative category. It is a constitutional term, legitimised by the state, a proposition that has not been fulfilled. It was, therefore, used at the time of the NGO's entry, when the NGO started working with Muslim women.<sup>59</sup>

References to the state and the constitution are present in both these observations. The NGO's understanding of the term 'minority' and its

<sup>57</sup> The observations I make here are based on field notes, 8–14 August 2005.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with a paralegal at Samuh, 24 August 2006, Chitrakoot.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Samuh's founder-leader, 18–21 September 2006, Lucknow.

use is, indeed, strongly influenced by the state's own definition and use of the term. The term 'minority' could encompass different groups—linguistic, religious, and territorial—and, in the Indian context, minorities on the basis of inferior caste status too. In official parlance, however, the term is actually restricted to religious minorities. Zoya Hasan observes that, in short, this mean 'everyone who is not a Hindu... In India, Muslims are the largest minority.'<sup>60</sup>

However, I was quite impressed by the manner in which the NGO leader herself made this very observation (quoted above). She explained how, initially, the NGO staff and leadership had rather unquestioningly taken on the term 'minority' from the workshops that had been conducted to expose them to the issue of communalism and to prepare them to begin work with Muslims. She also admitted that the NGO, consisting of activists predominantly from caste-Hindu and Dalit backgrounds, seemed to have unconsciously identified 'Muslims' as the 'other' and that there may have been a hesitation on their part to overtly name this 'other'. In the words of the founder-leader:

Maybe there is also some unconscious thing to make it more neutral. If you say 'minority', it could be any community which is less in number. Because we've never used the word 'Hindu' in working with the Hindus in the past. We never said 'We work with Hindus' because we were Hindus ourselves! Now, we say 'We work with the Muslims' *because* we are not [Muslims]. It becomes the other. We work with the 'Muslims'. Who are 'we'? 'We' are the Hindus, is it not?<sup>61</sup>

The leader's remarks bring to mind Dilip Menon's argument about 'the censoring of the word "Muslim" in the national English-speaking press and the use of the persistent, pernicious euphemism: "the minority group"'.<sup>62</sup> The leader's remarks and the argument put forward by Menon together explain the absence of the word 'Muslim' from the documentation produced by the organization, and the use of the term 'minority' in its place.

The staff and leadership claim that, today, however, Samuh increasingly uses the term 'Muslim' in place of 'minority'. Shifting

<sup>60</sup> Z. Hasan (2004). 'Social inequalities, secularism and minorities in India's democracy', in Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *Will Secular India Survive?*, Gurgaon: ImprintOne, p. 242.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Samuh's founder-leader, 18–21 September 2006, Lucknow.

<sup>62</sup> D. Menon (2006). 'An inner violence: why communalism in India is about caste', in T. N. Srinivasan (ed.), *Threats to Secularism*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 62.

from 'minority' to 'Muslim' has been a gradual process and one that has been far from easy. One of the paralegals at Samuh says:

Now we straightaway say 'Muslim'. But we have had many discussions, even fights, about this in the past one year. In our review meetings also this has come up. Why call them 'minority' when Muslims are the only religious minority in our area!<sup>63</sup>

Although they no longer refer to Muslims as 'minority', the NGO staff and leadership seem to continue imagining Muslims as a 'minority', in the official sense of the term. Since the focus is on their 'religious minority' status, almost to the exclusion of other aspects of their identity (gender, class, and so on), the NGO seems to have failed to engage with Muslims' everyday survival and development-related concerns. As a women's NGO, it might be expected to have engaged more explicitly with Muslim women's gender identity, but this too seems to be more or less absent. It is only within the context of the Conversations Forum (which brings together girls from caste-Hindu, Dalit, and Muslim backgrounds) that some discussion of their gender-based concerns seems to take place.

The 'minority' tag also seems to have clouded the NGO's understanding of Muslims in that there does not seem to be any acknowledgement of heterogeneity among them. Muslims are highly differentiated according to class, occupation, sect, caste-like stratification, linguistic affiliation, and region. According to the Anthropological Survey of India, over 350 regional or ethno-linguistic Muslim groups exist in India. Most Indian Muslims are Sunni and, of these, most are Hanafi, with some Shafi in the south. About 10 per cent are Shia, mostly Ithna Ashari. The newly released Sachar Committee Report on the condition of Muslims divides them into three classes: Ashrafs (who are seen as equivalent to upper caste Hindus), Ajlafs (along the lines of Hindu Other Backward Castes), and Arzals (similar to Dalits).<sup>64</sup>

In neither the NGO documentation nor in my interactions with the staff and leadership was any mention made about the specific background of the Muslims with whom the NGO engages, even though the specifics of the categories of people with whom they work are

<sup>63</sup> Interview with a paralegal at Samuh, 26–28 July 2006, Banda.

<sup>64</sup> For a detailed account of the condition of Muslims, see the official website for the Ministry of Minority Affairs (Government of India): Government of India (2006), 'Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community in India', <<http://minorityaffairs.gov.in/sachar>>, [accessed 29 September 2008].

important for it—after all, the NGO staff and leadership have been so particular in specifying whether they engage mainly with the Chamar caste of Dalits. What I am alluding to is that Samuh seems to have assumed Muslims to be a homogeneous grouping as far as its activism is concerned.

Again, in this respect, the NGO seems to have been influenced by the official and popular discourse. Muslims are written and talked about as simply Muslims—the regional, caste, and occupational markers by which they are known among themselves losing much of their significance—in official documents, journalism, and common conversation.<sup>65</sup> Even though the NGO no longer refers to Muslims as ‘minority’ and has, in that sense, moved beyond the official discourse, it does not seem to have been able to do so in terms of recognizing their heterogeneity. This seems to indicate that even though the NGO has acknowledged in its activism and approach the presence of communal bias, it still has a long way to go before it can be said that it has been able to overcome this bias fully.

While such politics of identity and labelling offers relevant insights into the kind of problems that the NGO is faced with and is attempting to negotiate in its engagement with Muslims, an examination of the new dilemmas and challenges confronting the NGO must probe beyond it. I will now discuss its employment of the human rights discourse with respect to its engagement with Muslims, the reasons behind it doing so, and how this has been perceived by the Dalits with whom it has been working for many years now. Just as I had found the term ‘Muslim’ absent and replaced by ‘minority’ in most of the organization’s annual newsletters and reports produced after the Gujarat riots, I discovered that terms such as ‘human being(s)’, ‘humanity’, and ‘rights’ (*insan*, *insaniyat*, and *adhikar*) kept appearing and reappearing in them.<sup>66</sup>

When I remarked on this to one of the paralegals who had spent an extended period of time in Gujarat, she said, ‘Women are human beings. Dalit and Muslim are also human beings. After the Gujarat riots, we just cannot not think in terms of human beings and humanity.’<sup>67</sup> I was not completely certain about what she meant, and I

<sup>65</sup> For a historical analysis of discrimination against Muslims in India, refer to Gyanendra Pandey (2005), *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories*, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

<sup>66</sup> See, for instance, Vimukt Mahila Samuh (2003), *Annual Report 2002–2003*, Chitrakoot: Vimukt Mahila Samuh.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with a paralegal at Samuh, 26–28 July 2006, Banda.



was keen to find out whether using the language of human rights was a conscious effort and a well-thought-out strategy on the part of the NGO. I therefore asked another Samuh paralegal (who had also been closely associated with the initiatives launched by the organization to promote communal harmony) to explain. This is what she had to say:

Using [the language of human rights] [*manavadhikar ki bhasha*] allows us to bring together and justify our work with the Dalits and the Muslims as towards the same objective of equality and not two separate things... Our organisation's job is to eradicate inequality [*Humari sanstha ka kaam asamanta ko mitana hai*].<sup>68</sup>

Theoretically, the rights-based approach of the NGO may be sufficient to argue for the coming together of Dalits and Muslims. After all, human rights language does offer the promise of universalism as a way to underscore claims for equality (sameness) and equity (difference).<sup>69</sup> There are many similarities in the condition of the Dalits and the Muslims. Many Muslims are poor like the Dalits: the Sachar Committee Report tells us that their condition is worse than that of the Other Backward Castes and, indeed, closer to that of the Scheduled Castes. One news report even called Muslims 'the new Untouchables of India'.<sup>70</sup> Is the marginality that the Dalits and the Muslims share enough for them to want to join together in their struggle to overcome it?

Samuh may claim that its work with the Dalits and the recent inclusion of Muslims (mainly towards promoting communal harmony) is part of a single, perfectly coherent project, but has the NGO really been able to bring together its work with the Dalits and its more recent attempts to promote communal harmony? Has it been able to integrate Muslim women into the initiatives it had been running with Dalit women? Answers to these questions are explored below. In this regard, comments made by the senior leader are quoted at length. The perspectives of NGO staff members and the Dalits mobilized by the NGO also offer rich insights into these questions. I am aware that the voices of Muslim women mobilized by the NGO would have

<sup>68</sup> Interview with a paralegal at Samuh, 24 August 2006, Chitrakoot.

<sup>69</sup> For a theoretical account of human rights, equity, and equality, see Naila Kabeer (2005), "Growing" citizenship from the grassroots: Nijera Kori and social mobilisation in Bangladesh', in Naila Kabeer (ed.), *Inclusive Citizenship: Meanings and Expressions*, New Delhi: Zubaan, pp. 181–98.

<sup>70</sup> *Washington Post*, 4 November 2007.

strengthened the arguments I make here, but despite the efforts that I made, it was difficult to gather their views on this issue.

I began by talking to women from Samuh's self-help groups. I found out that although the groups comprised mainly Dalit women, Muslim women were part of some of those groups that had been set up since 2001 under the auspices of the government of India-sponsored and World Bank-funded Swashakti scheme. The Dalit self-help group leaders said that the Muslim women in their group did not attend regularly, did not seem to mix enough, and did not stay for long whenever they came for the monthly meetings.<sup>71</sup> These observations raise concerns about the integration of Muslim women into Samuh's self-help groups.

There are, of course, many village hamlets in which Muslims are absent or are very few in number. When asked to comment on the relations between the different communities in one such village, a respondent observed:

In some places, where the Hindus are less than the Muslims, there have been tensions. We are of Hindu caste [*jat*] and in us there is sympathy [*sheelta*] but among Muslims they don't have that kind of sympathy. You see, Muslims... they murder without pity, throw bombs at us. Muslims are very orthodox [*kattarpanti*]. It is Muslims who trigger such violence, isn't it! The thing is Muslims are a little less educated than us. They get involved in fights. This is not a new story. This has been going on for years...<sup>72</sup>

The respondent's remarks reflect the misinformation, prejudice, and antipathy that Dalits have towards Muslims. Even as the NGO surges ahead with its Conversations Forum and Tremor Forum initiatives, change in the perceptions of the women the NGO has spent many years mobilizing, and in the matrix of day-to-day relations among Dalit and Muslim women, is yet to take place. What the respondent's remarks also reveal is that when it comes to Muslims, the Dalits identify themselves as Hindus. S. Anandhi's analysis in this regard is especially apt. In a study on Dalits and secular politics in Madras slums, she notes:

If the Hindus are identified as religiously broadminded, this 'definitionbyself' immediately implies a 'definitionforother' namely that the Muslims are narrowminded and fundamentalist. In Triplicane slums, the Dalits, in

<sup>71</sup> These observations are drawn from my focus group discussions with women from a self-help group, 19 and 20 August 2006, a village in Chitrakoot.

<sup>72</sup> Focus group discussion with women from a self-help group, 26 November 2005, a village in Chitrakoot.

identifying themselves positively as Hindus, mark out the Muslims with a range of negative attributes.<sup>73</sup>

It is important to clarify here that anti-Muslim stereotypes held and expressed by Dalits (in this case) and caste-Hindus are certainly not a new development. They were part of their common wisdom long before the rise in popularity of the Hindu nationalists from the 1980s onwards.<sup>74</sup> This common wisdom, imbued as it is with communal feelings, is what I refer to as 'communal common sense'. By itself, it appears to be banal in nature. Hindu nationalists have exploited it to mobilize the Dalits on the basis of a pan-Hindu identity towards achieving their goal of setting up a 'Hindu nation'. Their agenda, as explained earlier, is a virulent one. Samuh's efforts to promote communal harmony and, more specifically, to bring together Dalits and Muslims must be aimed constantly at transforming the apparently banal communal common sense and defeating the more virulent Hindu nationalist propaganda.

The way in which Samuh is trying to bring about social change, is, then, a slow and arduous process. If caste-Hindus treat Dalits as the 'other', Dalits and caste-Hindus, by virtue of their common religious-cultural background, in turn treat Muslims as their 'other'. In a focus group discussion with Samuh staff, one respondent observed that even today in the event of a crisis, the Dalits and caste-Hindus would not hesitate to align themselves in opposition to the Muslims: 'All Hindus will become one. No one will see Chamar/Domar [Dalit castes] even if in normal circumstances they may be practising untouchability against each other.'<sup>75</sup> Even among Samuh's staff members from caste-Hindu and Dalit communities, prejudice and misinformation about Muslims tends to surface at times (if rarely). This is the case despite the exposure that they have had to Muslim customs and law and the communal question after the Gujarat riots.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>73</sup> S. Anandhi (1995), *Contending Identities: Dalits and Secular Politics in Madras Slums*, New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, p. 41.

<sup>74</sup> For an elaboration of the argument about how anti-Muslim stereotypes expressed by Dalit and caste-Hindus are not a recent phenomenon, refer to Datta, *Carving Blocks*; Jeffery and Jeffery (eds), *Confronting Saffron Demography*; and Yasmin Khan (2007), *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

<sup>75</sup> Focus group discussion with Samuh staff members, 26 August 2006, Chitrakoot.

<sup>76</sup> These observations are made on the basis of focus group discussions conducted with Samuh staff members, 25 August 2006, Chitrakoot.

When asked about Muslim-Dalit solidarity, the Samuh founder-leader candidly admits:

I really don't know. I am absolutely not willing to say that they will be brother-brother [*bhaibhai*] or sister-sister [*behenbehen*]. . . Muslim-Dalit friendship is *not* there! Ideally, one wants all marginalised groups [to feel united] but that's not the reality. [Dalits' and Muslims'] needs, their identity, their politics are so different. Culturally, they are so different. It is *our* desire that there be solidarity. But I have a feeling that it's not going to happen. . . And then those on the margins become very competitive for the little resources that are there in the world.<sup>77</sup>

Yet she also adds, 'I am always an idealist. . . You've got to do what your conscience tells you to do. . . it may change five people!'<sup>78</sup> The Samuh leader is well aware that Muslim-Dalit solidarity is still a myth. The observations of the respondent from the self-help group and the Samuh fieldworker, quoted above, clearly point towards this. Yet the leader believes that the NGO must attempt to make it into reality. Samuh is not the first organization interested in promoting Muslim-Dalit solidarity. The philosophical underpinnings of this project can be traced all the way back to Ambedkar and other anti-caste reformers. Shared opposition to Brahmanism and caste was suggested as the basis for unity among the Dalits and the Muslims. It was argued that both ate beef, were poor, and were considered polluting by the caste-Hindus.<sup>79</sup>

However, as the Samuh founder-leader herself observes, the similarities in the condition of the Dalits and the Muslims tend to result in their competing for the same set of resources from the state and in society, rather than collaborating. It would be useful to point out here that this is, in fact, typical of relations between a number of marginalized groups, including the Other Backward Castes and the Dalits, and has been commented upon by scholars of political economy in contemporary India.<sup>80</sup> Regardless of whether one ought or ought not to approve, what can be taken from the NGO leader's remarks is

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Samuh's founder-leader, 18–21 September 2006, Lucknow.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Samuh's founder-leader, 18–21 September 2006, Lucknow.

<sup>79</sup> For an elaboration of the philosophical underpinnings of the project to bring about Muslim-Dalit solidarity, refer to Gail Omvedt (2005), 'Muslim-Dalit Relation', *Countercurrents*, <<http://www.countercurrents.org/dalit-omvedt220505.htm>>, [accessed 17 September 2008].

<sup>80</sup> See, for example, Francine Frankel (2005), *India's Political Economy, 1947–2004: The Gradual Revolution*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

that, in order to be able to take a position, one has to start from an understanding of this.

The NGO leadership may understand this tension in Muslim-Dalit relations. Nevertheless, there remains an undercurrent of tension in its own efforts to bring together its work with the Dalits and its more recent attempts to work with the Muslims. The term 'Dalit' means amputated, stepped on, split, broken, burst, destroyed or crushed.<sup>81</sup> One could thus imagine Muslims, also marginalized in Indian society, as 'Dalits'. For the NGO, as far as its activism is concerned, the term must necessarily have to do with Chamars and with caste identity, not religion. To quote the founder-leader:

We have a very different definition of 'Dalit' from others working with Dalits. They say 'Dalit' is anyone who is socially, economically and politically deprived. . . We are very clear that 'Dalit' has a lot to do with Chamar. If you are a Chamar, you are a Chamar. Just because you come and say you are feeling marginalised doesn't make you a Dalit.<sup>82</sup>

I was, therefore, surprised when I found out that the NGO also encouraged Muslim women to join the Dalit Mahila Samiti (Dalit Women's Association), the initiative it has been running with Dalit women for some time now. The Muslim women were a minority in the Samiti, which brought together women from Samuh's self-help groups.<sup>83</sup>

Muslim women were also invited to the three-day-long Dalit festival that the NGO had organized in February 2006 to bring together the women from the Dalit Mahila Samiti. Every woman present at the festival had been asked to take an oath in the name of Dr B. R. Ambedkar, touching an enlarged photograph of him. Each woman had also been given a badge, with a photograph of the nineteenth-century Dalit social reformers, Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule, and the caption 'Dalit Mahila Samiti'. Among the activities that were organized at the festival was one where the women were called onstage to burn material items associated with the practice of untouchability on a funeral pyre, as a symbolic subversion of the Hindu last rites ceremony.

The Muslim women at the festival could neither relate to any of this nor were they comfortable with it. Fire is not considered sacred in Islam

<sup>81</sup> This explanation for the meaning of the word 'Dalit' is drawn from Badri Narayan (2006), *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity and Politics*, New Delhi: Sage Publications.

<sup>82</sup> Interview with Samuh's founder-leader, 18–21 September 2006, Lucknow.

<sup>83</sup> The observations made here are based on my field notes, 13 August 2006.

in the way it is in institutionalized Hinduism. For the Muslim women with whom the NGO works, their religious beliefs are non-negotiable. It is surprising that the NGO, which claims to recognize religio-cultural difference and create contexts for building awareness and respect among members of different castes and religious communities, should have failed to pay attention to the Muslim women's religious sensibilities. A number of Muslim women refused outright to take the oath, while others took it but omitted to touch Ambedkar's photograph and all reference to him in the oath. Much of the meaning of the attempted subversion of the Hindu last rites ceremony was also lost on the Muslim women.

While icons and symbols may be a crucial component in the process of constructing collective identity, Muslims do not regard Ambedkar as their messiah in the way Dalit women do. Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule may have done much to uplift the Dalits but they did little for Muslims. The NGO had failed to conceive of and employ icons and symbols that the Muslim women gathered at the festival were comfortable with.<sup>84</sup> Clearly, the Muslim women were misfits at the festival. It appeared as if the NGO wanted to have them there but that the festival itself was not intended for them but mainly for the Dalit women it had been mobilizing prior to its engagement with the Muslim women.

The use of symbols, oath-taking, and distribution of badges are important for creating and reinforcing a sense of collective identity in a group. However, the NGO seemed to be making the same mistake that the women's movement itself had been accused of: employing religio-cultural symbols of the dominant group at the expense of those in the minority. If women's movement organizations had allegedly used predominantly Hindu symbols and icons, Samuh seemed to be employing symbols and icons that only the Dalit women could find meaningful. In this sense, Muslim women continued to remain excluded.

When asked to explain the organization's position on the issue, this is what the founder-leader said:

One realises that this is a stop gap arrangement... We've had several debates in planning all this, this year... Which symbols to use? Trying to do this

<sup>84</sup> The only aspect of the oath and the ceremony that the Muslim women possibly may have found meaningful was the reference to the practice of untouchability. Exclusion is, after all, practised among and between members of different Muslim sects and also between Muslims and non-Muslims.

whole thing of secular doesn't mean that you let go of the symbols. There are things that the [Dalit] women most closely identify with. Ambedkar is very important. If you use a neutral symbol nobody will identify with it. And how do you have neutral symbols when you don't have a neutral identity! Also, the reality [of the matter] is that there weren't more than ten Muslim women at the Dalit festival.<sup>85</sup>

Given the similarity in the religio-cultural background of the Dalits and the caste-Hindus, conceptualizing a ritual means of interaction to construct collective identity had not been as challenging as it had now become. The founder-leader's remarks clearly demonstrate how Dalit and Muslim women's separate religio-cultural identities pose a challenge for Samuh in fashioning symbols and icons that are meaningful to both groups. Marginality is, in this sense, not enough to bind together Dalit and Muslim women. However, to say that only a handful of Muslim women were present at the festival is no justification for not paying due attention to their separate religio-cultural identity. Valorizing ex-Untouchable women's identity as 'Dalits' and subsuming the identity of women from Muslim communities is problematic. It is possible that there were only a handful of Muslim women at the festival because they did not feel a part of the Dalit Mahila Samiti to begin with.

The Samuh leader's response to the above observations is as follows:

One has to work towards building the numbers. Maybe, later, it will be 'Dalit Mahila Samiti' and 'Muslim Mahila Samiti' and the two groups will just interact with each other. If we ever get there! Right now, it is just about getting them in the same space, getting them to interact with each other.<sup>86</sup>

This statement suggests that the leader hopes that the challenge of integrating Dalit and Muslim women in the organization's activism will disappear once the NGO has mobilized a significant number of Muslims in both Banda and Chitrakoot districts. It also makes clear that the NGO is aware of the contradictions and complications that have arisen as a result of its engagement with Muslims. However, its present focus is much less on resolving those contradictions and complications than simply on mobilizing Muslims and promoting communal harmony. In other words, the recently formed Conversations Forum and Tremor Forum must succeed in ensuring that Muslims' interaction on a common platform with Dalits

<sup>85</sup> Interview with Samuh's founder-leader, 18–21 September 2006, Lucknow.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Samuh's founder-leader, 18–21 September 2006, Lucknow.

and caste-Hindus takes precedence over the NGO's concern about integrating Muslims into its initiatives with Dalit women, which have been in existence for many years now.

### Conclusion

Secularism needs to be understood as an ongoing project, one that is—and will always be—in the process of becoming. It must also be one that is meaningful to academics as well as the general public. Samuh, through its attempts to address the communal question and to mobilize Muslims, seems to follow this perspective. The NGO staff and leadership claim that the Gujarat riots acted as a trigger for them to do so. Prior to the riots, they had not really engaged with Muslims. They claim that Hindu majoritarianism within the women's movement, and specifically in their own organization, had prevented them from doing so. However, I have argued that the time-bound, project-based, donor-driven activism—in which Samuh had been engaged for many years and which, as a NGO, it had found difficult to escape—also played a part in its not having engaged with Muslims and the communal question earlier. The Gujarat riots did drive home the urgency of addressing the question but it was because Samuh was financially and organizationally in a position to take up the communal question and to engage with Muslims that it did so from 2002 onwards.

The NGO does not overtly state that it aims at promoting communal harmony. Secular discourse is subtly woven into the 'constructive, non-confrontational contexts' that it has set up for encouraging interaction between members of caste-Hindu, Dalit, and Muslim communities. It recognizes that caste-, religion-, class-, and gender-based divisions otherwise tend to keep people apart in a society where misconceptions about one another thrive. The Conversations Forum and Tremor Forum are two forums through which the NGO seeks to develop a 'we' consciousness among them. It has employed Muslims to facilitate this process. It has also sought to use personalized forms of raising awareness, linking hard activist language with elements from the local culture so that the social and political messages it is trying to convey through its activism can be easily understood and internalized by the people living in Chitrakoot and Banda districts of southern Uttar Pradesh. It is important to point out that, in its efforts to promote communal harmony, it has strategically chosen to engage with young people. Samuh's staff and leadership claim that they are



easy to work with and open to new ideas. They hope that, through these young people, they will be able to reach out to and influence the adult populations.

What deserves particular emphasis is that in its engagement with Muslims and its efforts to address the communal question, which may be interpreted as attempts to interrogate and activate secularism, the NGO expands the boundaries of the concept and practice of Indian secularism. Secularism is usually associated solely with religion in the Indian context. In contrast, Samuh's work on secularism includes and addresses not only caste-Hindus and Muslims but also Dalits. It is important to clarify here that the NGO staff and leadership seem to make a distinction between the normative state and the empirical state. They may challenge the empirical state and shape their engagement with secularism differently from it. However, they consider the normative state to be fair and just, and draw heavily from it in order to justify their activism. They continue to employ the language of the Constitution to sensitize the people with whom they work and to legitimize their work on secularism, even as they expand the boundaries of the latter in and through their practice.

Samuh's engagement with Muslims and its efforts to address the communal question throw up new challenges for the NGO's staff and leadership and the women with whom it works. The influence of the state on the NGO's activism is particularly telling when it comes to how long the NGO referred to—and still continues to imagine—Muslims as 'the minority'. In most official documents and policies, Muslims have been referred to as the minority, focusing specifically on their religious minority status. I argue that this focus has clouded Samuh's perspective in that it has failed to recognize the heterogeneity among Muslims, and has also failed to address those concerns that do not have to do with their religion *per se*.

Further, the NGO employs human rights discourse to present its work theoretically, with Dalits and Muslims as one and not two separate projects, since its work with both aims at combating inequality and exclusion. In practice, integrating the two projects has been far more complicated. Muslims are perceived as the 'other' by both Dalits and caste-Hindus. The Dalit women from Samuh's self-help groups continue to harbour prejudiced views about Muslims, views that Hindu nationalists have been propagating for years. Marginality, which the Dalits and Muslims share, does not seem sufficient to bring women from the two communities together. Furthermore, the differences in the religio-cultural background of the

two communities pose a challenge for the NGO itself in integrating Muslim women in its activism with Dalit women. Including Muslim women in forums, the main purpose of which is to highlight ex-Untouchable women's identity as Dalits, results in subsuming Muslim women's separate religio-cultural identity, and contradicts the NGO's own project of recognizing and accommodating difference, as it has sought to do through initiatives such as the Conversations Forum and Tremor Forum.

To conclude, if the secularist debate, which is caught between the polarities of separating religion from the state and accommodating different religions through state arbitration, remains unresolved in the political, constitutional, and philosophical domains, Samuh's experiential engagement with secularism—its attempts to involve Muslims in its activism and to address the communal question—has thrown up new dilemmas which have remained unresolved thus far. One is hesitant in being overtly critical of Samuh's activism, given that it has only recently begun working with Muslims and on the communal question. However, its struggles, aspirations, and inconsistencies offer rich insights on secularism in the context of the contemporary women's movement in India.